

VESPERS · A COMPANION FOR DARK TABLES

DEBTS & BARGAINS

Twenty offers with strings attached

Someone powerful offers exactly what a player needs, exactly when they need it. The price is what's stated. The string is the clause that never is — reveal it only when it pulls.

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1

"I can make the magistrate forget your name."

PRICE A season of your luck — small things, they promise. Coin tosses. Weather. Timing.

THE STRING Your luck doesn't vanish; it is *reassigned*. Someone else is having your good year, and when you finally meet them, they'll know exactly what you'll have come to take back.

2

"The door will be unlocked. The guards will be elsewhere. One night only."

PRICE You owe one door in return — to be opened by you, on request, no questions.

THE STRING The door they ask you to open, months from now, is one you locked yourself, for very good reasons, and they know that. That's why they bought the favor from *you*.

3

"Your friend will recover. I give you my word the fever breaks tonight."

PRICE Your gratitude, freely spoken, in front of witnesses.

THE STRING Spoken gratitude, in the old law those witnesses follow, is an acknowledged debt of unfixed size. It has been sold on, twice already, at interest.

4

"I'll tell you what your enemy fears."

PRICE You must tell no one — sealed with a handshake that stays cold longer than it should.

THE STRING Now something knows what *you* fear, learned through the same handshake, and your enemy was offered the matching bargain an hour before you.

5

"The debt your family owes? Consider it restructured."

PRICE Nothing this generation. Truly. Nothing.

THE STRING The debt has been converted from money to *standing* — your family now votes, marries, and testifies as instructed, and the first instruction will arrive with your firstborn's name on it.

6

"I can find anyone. Give me something they touched."

PRICE The object is consumed. Also: they will know, in the moment they are found, who asked.

THE STRING The finder keeps a copy of the scent, so to speak. You are now findable by the same method, forever, and that service is available to anyone who pays.

7

"Sanctuary. Behind these walls, nothing can touch you. Stay as long as you need."

PRICE House rules: sunset curfew, no iron, and one hour of your evening spent reading aloud to your host — who never appears, and listens from behind a screen.

THE STRING Every book you read aloud is being *finished*. When the last one closes, the host will no longer need the readings, the sanctuary, or, regrettably, you to leave.

8

"Ask your question. I have the answer — I've had it for a long time."

PRICE An answer for an answer. Theirs first, then yours, to one question, fully and truthfully.

THE STRING They don't ask their question tonight. They bank it. Years from now, at the precise moment when truth costs the most, they will ask — and the bargain compels.

9

"Your rival's caravan will not arrive."

PRICE You must not ask how. You must never ask how.

THE STRING Not asking is the mechanism. The method was chosen to be the one thing you'd have forbidden, and your not-asking, witnessed and recorded, is your signature on it.

10

"I will lend you my name. Doors open for it."

PRICE Use it exactly seven times, then return it with thanks.

THE STRING Everything done under the name accrues to the name — including what its *other* borrowers are doing, right now, in three cities you've never visited. On the seventh use, the ledger presents itself.

11

"The wound will close. The scar will even flatter you."

PRICE The pain isn't destroyed; it is deferred. You'll be told when. You will not be told how long.

THE STRING Deferred pain gathers interest. It is due, in full, at a moment of their choosing — and they are patient, and they have watched you long enough to know exactly which moment would break you.

12

"Safe passage, tonight, through territory that eats travelers."

PRICE Walk the exact path. Look straight ahead. Whatever you hear beside the road, do not answer it.

THE STRING One of the voices beside the road will be one you cannot ignore — that is the toll, and everyone who arranged your passage knew it. Answering doesn't kill you. It *enrolls* you: next season, yours is one of the voices.

13

"Evidence? What evidence? By morning there will be no evidence."

PRICE A single hair from your head, freely given.

THE STRING The evidence isn't destroyed — it is *rehomed*, and the hair establishes whose story it now tells. You are clean because someone else, somewhere, has become guilty of your night, and they are looking for you.

14

"I'll teach you the trick of it — the thing your master died without telling you."

PRICE You may never teach it to anyone. It ends with you.

THE STRING The technique is a strand of something larger that must not be completed. You now carry a piece the way a courier carries a letter — and everything that hunted your master for it has a new address.

15

"The child will be provided for. Educated. Protected. Given every chance you never had."

PRICE Visits on the first of each month. Nothing more is asked of you. Truly.

THE STRING The visits are for the child to learn your face — because at majority, the child is presented with the full account of what their upbringing cost, and the family tradition of how such debts are collected from the parent.

16

"Sleep. I'll stand your watch. You have my word nothing will pass."

PRICE Whatever you dream tonight, you must tell them at dawn, completely.

THE STRING Nothing passes the watch *inward*. Your dream is the outbound report — the reconnaissance you unknowingly perform in territory only the sleeping can enter — and dawn is the debriefing.

17

"Gold, tonight, no papers, no interest. Between friends."

PRICE None. It is a gift. They insist on that word.

THE STRING Gifts, unlike loans, cannot be repaid — only reciprocated. The counter-gift they eventually request will also, of course, be freely given between friends. Refusal ends the friendship, and everything the friendship was holding back.

18

"I can get you an audience. The great one owes me a listening."

PRICE You speak only truth in that room — the room enforces this; it isn't a rule, it's a property.

THE STRING The audience is granted *because* of the room. Your patron's real client is the great one, who needed you asked three particular questions under truth — and your petition was merely the envelope they arrived in.

19

"Whatever is hunting you — I can make it stop."

PRICE You must never again travel by night. A small adjustment, for peace.

THE STRING It stops because a boundary is drawn at dusk, and boundaries have two sides. You are not protected from the night; you are *withheld* from it — collateral in escrow, held against a debt the hunter now owes your benefactor, payable in you.

"Name it. Anything. Tonight I am in a giving mood."

PRICE To be discussed after. Between reasonable parties. Nothing you'll miss.

THE STRING The price is set *by what you name* — the old symmetry: ask for power, owe obedience; ask for love, owe grief; ask for knowledge, owe testimony. The mood is genuine. Giving is how it feeds.